Moonflower
A Baroryuu Zine

Moonflower (Ipomoea alba)

noun.

1. A sweet-smelling white flower that bloom only at dusk.

2. A zine dedicated to the relationship between Barok van Zieks and Ryuunosuke Naruhodou from The Great Ace Attorney Chronicles.

Thank you for picking up Moonflower: A Baroryuu Zine.

We hope you will enjoy the wonderful artwork and writings made by our lovely contributors.

the eaves, the ferns

Written By
halmikan

> **shinobugusa** *n.* (Haiku) 1. ferns that grow on old tree trunks, rock surfaces, and the eaves of old houses 2. an autumnal word used in haiku 3. seeds of remembrance

"The shadow of the autumn leaves, is the shadow of the moon,"

Ryuunosuke doesn't play very often. Barok often wonders why, when he's nothing but captivating. Whispered songs, syncopated rhythm, his voice in between the strings. It's almost a shame, that he's the only listener; a performance bound to a six-tatami square attic room. Ryuunosuke is just barely audible enough for Barok to hear. His breaths, his inhales, the stops, the shift and shuffle of his sleeves almost more pronounced. Clicks, taps, the odd accidental glissando as the pads of his fingertips brush along the skin of the shamisen.

The hosozao used to be his older sister's, he's been told. As was the hobby, too, initially–something Ryuunosuke had picked up from watching her, summer nights on the engawa. So, naturally, she had said, *naturally*–it was the only gift she thought was right to leave him when she had moved to Nagano to marry. Naturally, then, Ryuunosuke had also inherited the same cloth cover she had always used. And the last spare bundle of silk string Ryuunosuke remembers her buying while on an errand. And the very same wood bachi Ryuunosuke forgoes, this time, playing without the plectrum. Laid carefully atop a small band of cloth on the tatami, the yubikake Ryuunosuke doesn't wrap around his fingers.

The open window brings way to the gentle flutter, the loose ends. Some ways away from Ryuunosuke's knees, folded under his own weight, the moonlight at his toes.

"On the water's surface, of rivers in the mountains."

Barok thinks he could sleep like this. At the windowsill of their home. Under the eaves. Against the shouji walls. His fingers idling the winding roads below. Hushed hums. Thinning crowds.

Dusk.

Dog days. Tempered.

A lull in the air.

“To wilt and scatter, is to float.”

“To wait and linger, is to drown.”

“The shadow of the autumn leaves, is the shadow of the moon,”

“On the water’s surface, of rivers in the mountains.”

You dream.

You dream of the night, but you do not see.

You feel the grains of the wood against your sole, unsure whether it’s the docks or the waxed paulownia of your geta.

Walking gets you nowhere at all. At least, not anywhere you’re meant to be.

You hear sand. Falling within an hourglass. Rolling with the tide where the ocean meets land.

You do not see, but you close your eyes.

There’s a light in the distance. Far, on the other side of the cape. You trace it across the darkness.

Ophiuchus, Saturn, in the southeastern sky. The moon on the other side of Spica.

“Oh?” Ryuunosuke pauses mid-chew, speaks around the bamboo skewer still between his teeth. He takes his time with the second dango, unbothered as he

savours the mitarashi, licking a wayward droplet sticking to the corner of his mouth. Barok falls into step with him, stops, ever so slightly behind, waiting for him to continue. The surrounding streets of Sensou-ji at night are brighter than Barok had initially imagined—gaslamps and overhead lanterns strung high, andon on the wayside, by their feet and by the entrances to izakayas, yose theatres, washoku restaurants. Summer in Asakusa smells like burning coal and sweet bean paste.

He's gotten used to the taste of anko, found that he's acquired a preference for koshian over tsubuan, to Ryuunosuke's dismay. A staunch believer of tsubuan, alas, the young man despairs that he's not found a single kin; Prosecutor Asougi and Judicial Assistant Mikotoba supposedly belonging to this side of the gulf, leaving him to fight his lonely, lonely war. Barok is more than happy to compromise, of course, electing to patronise kissaten and wagashiya he knows to specialise in tsubuan, whenever they're out together.

He's gotten used to the language. Not as much as he had hoped. Enough to order for them both. For practice, he insists. Because he loves to dote on Ryuunosuke, he admits, privately. As private as one's thoughts could be, under the loving and knowing gaze of Naruhodou Ryuunosuke, all sweet and molten sugar syrup, kuromitsu and crinkles at the outer corners of his eyes, a smile he never attempts to hide. Barok does not cover his cheeks. He does not even pretend to feel the still-novel silk of his kimono sleeves against his skin. His cheeks had ached, but Ryuunosuke's must've been, as well. Shared glances, reciprocal rosiness. What a pair they must make.

He has not, however, quite gotten the intricacies of rakugo. So Ryuunosuke insists that they watch the up-and-coming Hayashiya sons every weekend, and perhaps eventually have him educated on the absolute comedic brilliance that is Jugemu and his absurdly long name. It's culture, Barok-san, surely you understand?

Barok hasn't the heart to tell him.

But he can appreciate the evening walks that come with it, he supposes. He much prefers it to the smouldering midday sun.

So he breathes in the scent of the night, and closes his eyes. Listens, to the rustle of paper lanterns, geta against hardened ground, his own heartbeat, faint, crackling embers.

Ryuunosuke brings his hand to his mouth as he swallows, then calls Barok's attention with a tug on his sleeve. He points to a flier, pinned onto a wall next to a theatre ticket booth. *Ryougoku Kawabiraki*, Barok thinks he could infer from the kanji—though he could vaguely guess the reading, the meaning escapes him.

"It's a fireworks festival," Ryuunosuke explains, evidently a response to his furrowed brows. "By the Sumida River."

Barok has no doubt that he's grasped enough of the Japanese language to interpret the implicit, to glean the unspoken. He reads the way Ryuunosuke fidgets slightly, the pads of his fingers pressed together, his eyes, earnest through his lashes, trying his best not to look away.

It's but a simple invitation. And an even simpler answer.

There isn't much light. Spark trails. The tell-tale click of ferrocerium at its kindling point, a lighter struggling to ignite. You think you might be holding your hand up in front of you. Your palm facing outwards, and then the other way, a turn of your wrist, slow. It might have been your eyes, finally used to the darkness, or perhaps it's the moonlight from behind the clouds, catching at your fingertips, streaming between the gaps, outlining the bumps, the fine hairs, your knuckles and the texture of your skin.

The moon is beautiful.

Tonight, too. Just as it was last night and the night before. The moon had always been beautiful—five years ago, between the curtains of the carriage window, a pleasant companion throughout the ride from Yokohama Port across Bashamichi. It had already been beautiful seven, ten years ago. At Dover, white with the coming daybreak. Through the crystalline glass of your office window, the brightest you've ever seen it, reflected into the mirror on the opposite wall, just above the shoulder of your love.

It'll still be beautiful tomorrow, the day after, the day after that day, and all the days after. Every subsequent dawn and each following dusk, primordial patience, perennial peace. Watching over mist and detritus, dancing lantern lights, luminescence floating down the Sumida River.

'The moon is beautiful,' you've said countless times, countless voices, colours, inflexions, breadth, space. It hasn't lost its meaning. You're certain it never will.

But you've said it so often that it has long since weaved itself in your touch. Counting the threads, the stitches along the back of his haori, tracing the curve of the collar of his kimono.

(And his nape, the soft, fuzzy baby hairs, the moles peppered about, hiding in his hairline.)

You feel the summer dew drops, leaves of grass brushing at your heels, the breeze blowing past the hem of your kimono, connecting your presence to his. You *feel* the moon's radiance—an outpour, ever-cascading.

You feel–

You feel–

"Barok-san, look!"

Gentle warmth. Blooming high above their heads, fireworks, far away—or, it was supposed to be. Barok feels it closer. Hears it closer, in time with his heart, beating with the pulse he feels, thumbing over his wrist.

Ryuunosuke's smile comes with a whistle of a wisp, then two, scattered lights trailing downwards, the kawara roof tiles, an overhang, his cheeks, his shoulder.

"I've gotten it to light up!"

Away from the crowds, rounding corners and up the hill, a sheltered strip of road tucked behind the walls of the Matsuchiyama Shouden. The small spark disappears before it reaches his feet. It burns steady.

It's not the coastal waters sluicing around your ankles, nor is it the beach giving way beneath your soles. It's not the sand between your toes, the silk thongs of your geta hooked between your fingers.

You can't quite recall the last time you've seen the pair of shoes staring back at

you. Leather oxfords. *When–? Did–?* You remember—*you think*—no. Not quite. You've grown to heavily favour wellingtons for most of your adulthood, so, then, *surely*—

Come to think of it, your footprints are smaller than what you've come to recognise for yourself. The ferns off the track are deeper in colour, leaves wider—rounded tips. A disconnect of ten, twenty, twenty-five years, now, you presume. The ferns of recent memory are muted, sharper, silver and burgundy and—

Burgundy.

Vivid burgundy. Copper and strontium salts. A flicker burnt into the back of your eyelids. Burgundy, behind lattice frames and glass window panes, the heavy drapery and the curtain canopy surrounding your boyhood bed.

Your outstretched hand is smaller, too, you realise. Held by your older brother's, guiding you, your sight, a singular line, out to the sky, the clouds.

You're used to fireworks out on the horizon. Never so close. Never so intimate.

"You're really good at this, Barok-san."

"Perhaps, I'm merely skilled at staying still?"

"Is that something you could be good or bad at?"

"It is, according to the Red Queen's hypothesis."

"Pardon?"

"'Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place.'"

"Hmm… If that's the case…"

"If that's the case?"

"I don't think it's so bad to let the days pass you by."

He starts with the night. He gathers their wooden pail, water and debris, submerged scraps of paper string from the senko hanabi, and walks with the moon. He doesn't chase the dawn on the other side of the hill. He doesn't stay with the twilight at his back, still along the floodplains. He holds the chouchin lantern for them both, the curved bamboo handle gripped tight in his left hand, and Ryuunosuke's hand—small, smaller than his own—gentler, in his right.

He is his own cadence.

He is, for all he knows, in the midst of a dream.

He feels.

Autumn, right around the corner, crossing torii, passing bridges, empty lots, cattails, foxtail grass to their knees.

He feels, and he is. He is. *He is.*

He is the cusp between seasons. He is the oscillation of the ocean waves, the breath of the earth, the gardenias dotting the gravel ground.

He is, and it's everything he could ever ask for.

"Barok-san?"

They're not home. Not yet. They've made a stop at Imado Shrine, a walk and a staircase's climb short. Barok doesn't want their night to end—at least, not for a bit longer.

He only needs a moment. *This* moment.

"This isn't a dream, is it?"

He can see why Ryuunosuke would think that. He's tucked them away in a dim puddle of light, their backs against the pillar of a stone lantern.

"If it is, then surely I must be the one dreaming."

Barok turns to him, his love, gazes at the hazily lit outlines of his profile, down, to the speckle of light on their laced-together fingertips. He doesn't know where

the moonlight starts and where light from their chouchin ends. It's not quite a sunspot, either, but it's enough.

A leather-bound journal and a fountain pen. Both burgundy. Dyed and lacquered respectively. It's the only two things of Klimt's Barok had brought with him to Japan. He's yielded his prosecutor's badge to his apprentice in concurrence with his own retirement. Naturally, it's only right, with their shared history. So, naturally, it's his prerogative, now, what he chooses to do with it.

He hasn't told Barok what he's done, if anything.

Barok is content not to know.

Trust, he thinks. Is the crux of it all.

It's *right*. Just as it's right to leave most of the pieces that make up the memory of his brother behind in England.

But this—*if only this*—he needed to keep, he feels. Because it's also *right*, when he flips through the pages—pages and pages of new memories etched in burgundy ink, burnt pinewood, clay and graphite conté. His given name, in hiragana, in katakana, in the sets of kanji Ryuunosuke had thought up for him. *Feather. Heron. Crimson.* (*Amber*, was also considered for a while, but was ultimately crossed out.) His name, again, with the affectionate honorific Ryuunosuke now calls him by. The lyrics to Kiyomoto Oyo's kouta for the shamisen.

"To wilt and scatter, is to float."

"To wait and linger, is to drown."

There's a sketch right next to it: ripples on a gentle stream, tiptoes, fingers trying to catch baikamo petals underwater.

It's colder than Barok realises.

But he continues.

Past the study notes. Daily reminders. Phrases. Teacups on the table and tearings staining the wood. Ryuunosuke. Ryuunosuke asleep at his desk. Ryuunosuke from the back. Foxtail grass, the hem of Ryuunosuke's kimono stained by the soft seeds. Burnets in the autumn. Tulip buds covered in a layer

of winter's frost. Forget-me-nots in the spring. Moon-vine. Sunflowers. The oil lamp they often leave on the windowsill.

The light at the end of the darkness,

The light from your dreams.

The light right in front of you.

The point at which they intersect.

And in the middle of it all.

In the middle of it all—

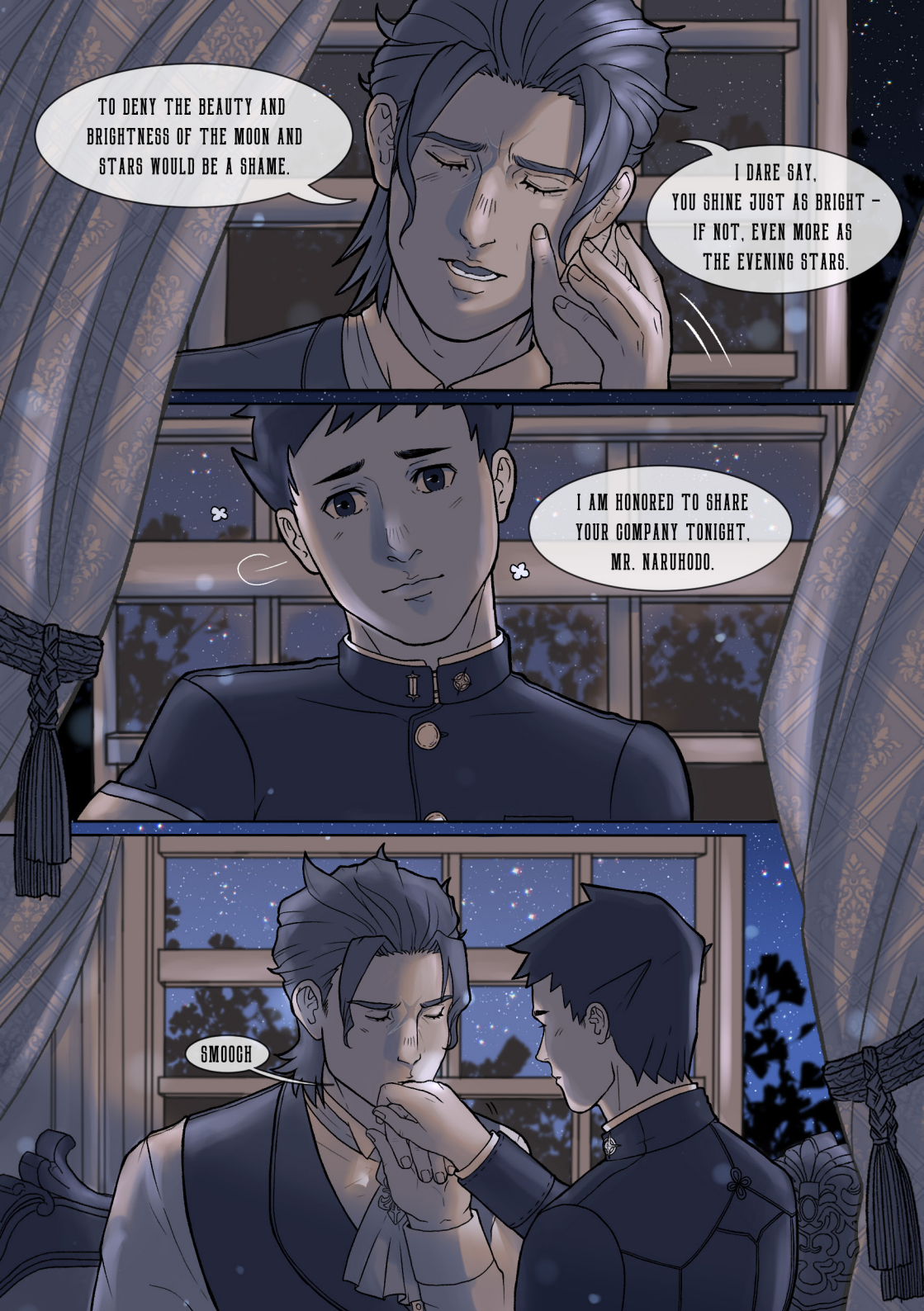
Barok van Zieks.

Your soul. Your memories. Your presence.

Your everything.

You.

THE MOON IS QUITE BEAUTIFUL TONIGHT.
DO YOU NOT AGREE, MY LORD?
I AGREE VERY MUCH, MY LEARNED FRIEND.


TO DENY THE BEAUTY AND BRIGHTNESS OF THE MOON AND STARS WOULD BE A SHAME.
I DARE SAY, YOU SHINE JUST AS BRIGHT – IF NOT, EVEN MORE AS THE EVENING STARS.
I AM HONORED TO SHARE YOUR COMPANY TONIGHT, MR. NARUHODO.
SMOOCH

LEMON WEDGES

paradise is not for the faint of heart

Written By
slowquotesquill

Without you, I am your dream, only that, and that is all.
—**Sonnet LXXXI,** Pablo Neruda

Tonight, Ryuunosuke Naruhodou was in my dreams once more.

I forgot just exactly when it was when he told me about a Nipponese tale where vengeful spirits slipped out of their living bodies to do murder in the night, and where lovers do the same thing, but in order to become one with each other. When was it again? Perhaps it was during the last time when we ever went to the summerhouse that Klimt built for his wife, very near the sea, and where Ryuunosuke once told me of his first love, and the sorrow that had wreathed his spirit ever since.

Even when, I think, all is said and done, when the goodbyes have been exchanged and the promises to meet again loosed from trembling lips, someone whose eyes have been marred with the sight of death will have changed forever. That is what I think, again, when we slipped out of our bodies that evening to exchange tender words of love in the land beyond sleep, where pain and fear cannot find us, where eternal sorrow simply cannot exist.

Ryuunosuke has grown, imperceptibly perhaps for those whose eyes have not watched him as frequently as I did, and his appearance I can reconstruct from the occasional photograph that he would have the opportunity to send me, enclosed in his many letters. Here, in our dream, he looked well and strong, wearing a suit in all black, as he was wont, his eyes, ruined from the many hours of ceaseless studying—no doubt an attempt to catch up with his fellows who had two years on him in legal know-how—framed behind cheap round glasses. His hair was as messy and spiky as it was in my fading memories of him years ago; when he looked at me, his dark-eyed gaze melancholic and gentle, I felt loved once more.

I felt less lonely.

In our dreams, we always met by the moonlit beach, of course, that one place in all the world where I had dreamed of selkies and finally, after a long time of

dreaming of them, met one, and there he was, my own selkie, kicking up the sand with his feet and smiling at me and missing me, perhaps even more than I miss him. But, of course, he cannot voice it, dutiful as he was, knowing that if he did, I would fly over the waves like a seagull, racing to envelop him in my arms once more.

They're so magnificent, these waves, he said, and while I cannot recall his voice anymore, I felt it resonate through my fingers, my ears, my hair, my chest, and I knew I was hearing his voice as I knew it from before. I took his hand, light and calloused in mine, and stained with ink, and I smiled down at him. Smiling, when it comes to Ryuunosuke, felt like it came more naturally to me, as if I was young once more, and with my first love.

Neither of us were the other's actual first love, but it was a beautifully bittersweet feeling, nonetheless, and came with none of the young angst that usually came with first loves. Ryuunosuke loved me, and I him, and I took a sense of peace from that, rather than agitation. A more… a more mature kind of love. Calmer. A little sadder. But love, all the same.

He led me to a spot on the beach, perhaps where he had been waiting for me long before I showed up, and we sat on the sand and he made garlands of cowries and seaweed to put in my hair, and I lay on his lap and closed my eyes as he gently did so. The sensation of his fingers carding through my hair was outrageously comfortable.

Ryuunosuke...

Mm? His tone was light, pleasant.

Do you remember? I said, softly.

What is it? he asked me, even though he knew what I was about to say, because this is a dream, and in dreams, we were one, and seeing the same thing.

The first time I kissed you, I said, and he smiled.

It was different, the first time *I* kissed him versus the first time he kissed me, and while to other people that might not seem like such a huge difference, it was, to me, the difference between night and day. And, of course, he knew every little thought that I had in mind. *Of course I remember, Barok,* he replied, and just to illustrate he leaned down closer to me, and I laughed and met him halfway and captured his lips in a kiss. He was warm and willing against me, and I wished

that this were all real.

But of course, in this time and space, anything can be real. This could be the seven-hundred-and-fifty-eighth kiss that we have ever shared since that first kiss. This could be the three-hundred-and-ninety-second time that I have ever kissed him. I counted, steadily, and kept on counting, and determined that I had been right, and then pulled him to me once more, and there was the three-hundred-and-ninety-third kiss that I had stolen from those lips, just like that.

The first time I kissed him, it had been snowing, softly, and he had been in the middle of his punishment from the Chief Justice and I believe if he hadn't been suspended from court disgracefully like that for those few months I wouldn't even have gotten to know him long enough to allow myself to fall for him, slight thing that he was, with his ink-stained hands and shabby cap and cape and stolid expression when he wasn't particularly thinking about something. It had been nighttime, then, I remember, vividly, because he was standing under the lamp, and he was staring blankly at the facade of the Old Bailey just as I had exited, and he had seen me, and I him, and it was too late, for he had raised a hand to greet me, and I had to acknowledge that I had just kissed this man—or rather, was kissed by him!—one week ago.

We were no longer people who… merely knew each other by chance.

But… of course… nothing was by chance. I had, from the very start, been chasing after him, picking his trials to prosecute, forcing myself to face the courtroom that I had shunned for many years before he, with his straight, honest, clear gaze and his stalwart arm, had presented himself before me like prey before the hunter—except that he was not, as I had once thought, another lamb, after all.

"What are you doing here?" I had hissed at him, and he said, irresistibly—
"I wanted to see you."

Surprise, fear, hope, nervous anticipation—I cycled through those emotions like some kind of roulette, spinning over and over, unable to decide how to react, and perhaps knowing that I was unable to set my mind on a final decision, of course, like the first time, he decided for me.

"Take a walk with me?" he said. "Please."

It was odd, perhaps, to take a walk through the graveyard of Saint Sepulchre during a snowy evening with Ryuunosuke Naruhodou of all people, but that

was what we did, stroll amongst the ancient, crumbling headstones, looking up at the one tree that stood in the middle of it, leafless, stretching its thin bare branches out into the sky and marring our view of the sky. Ryuunosuke was nervous, of course, not that I was any less nervous than he was, for I knew the question that he had wanted to ask. I had never been courted before in all my life—the very fact of my sex meant I should never have to subject myself to such a thing—but here he was, Nipponese and also undoubtedly male, wanting to get my answer on such a cold night as this one.

"I have come to," he began, and stopped, apparently lacking the words to say what he wanted to say. I glanced at him, slightly affronted, slightly embarrassed, and noticed that the snowflakes had accumulated on the shoulders of his cape. What an odd thing to notice. But then, the sight was so beautiful, and he was taking so long to come up with words, that I was already speaking before I can even—

"I know why you have come."

He was gazing up at me, round-eyed, and I irresistibly pressed my advantage, for to fall silent was to lose.

"I am not some wide-eyed sixteen-year-old, Mr. Naruhodou," I said, stiffly. "Of course I know why you have come. Despite… despite being warned not to come anywhere near the Old Bailey until your sentence has been lifted."

"I… I'm sorry," he said, and his meek apology incensed me where his unexpected presence did not, and in an instant I was grabbing the neck of his coat and was forcing him on his tiptoes so that I can stare into his face.

"Why are you sorry? *I*'m not."

"Wh—?" was all he managed to say, before I crushed my lips against his, the first time I had ever claimed someone's lips as mine ever since my youth, ever since the sting of my unreturned, shameful first love. Benjamin Dobinbough, if he did not know the truth of that affair, perhaps suspected a little—I had never told Ryuunosuke about those clumsy first attempts at currying the favor of someone else, and I expect that I never will, either. It was humiliating, unthinkable, heartwrenchingly dull and awkward; now that I am secure in a love that is wholly mine, I can safely push it into the void of oblivion, and make-believe that I had always been loved, unabashedly, that my love will always be requited, and never shamed for being so, so intense.

I was embarrassed then, dream-Ryuunosuke suddenly said, and I snapped back to the present… to the present, where we were still sharing the same dream.

I was, too, I admitted, and Ryuunosuke laughed, what a pleasing non-sound—I tried my hardest to sear his face into my dream-memory; the soft creases between his eyebrows, the laugh-lines that were starting to form. The eyes. Forever, the eyes. They were still clear, even in their physical fragility. They still afforded me a sense of peace. *But I couldn't help but kiss you then. You... your apology... infuriated me like nothing else could.*

That is an odd thing to get angry over, he remarked.

I... I tried to explain myself, the words escaping me like they did him back then, and with great difficulty, I caught them, one by one. *I think... I was angry... because you sounded so sorry about it.*

About... about what?

About the fact that you had kissed me first. I smiled. *About the fact that you had come to see me, and that you had pulled me into that snowy graveyard just to confess. I was angry that you seemed sorry about all of it... when I wasn't.*

I didn't know you back then, he said, chuckling. *I remember you looking like a stormcloud, and I just... froze.*

Will you kiss me now? I said, because I wanted another, and he obliged, with a huge smile.

You are very spoiled, my lord.

Do you mind it?

Of course not. He brushed my hair away from my face. You know I don't.

Good...

My lord, he repeated, and I closed my eyes and smiled. *I... I wonder when I stopped using it so formally... that honorific... to call you. My lord. My lord.* I can imagine how perfect and funny his expression was while he was trying to roll the words off his tongue, and I felt for his hand and kissed the nail of his ring finger. He let out a soft adoring sound. *My lord,* I repeated back to him, and he laughed.

My lord, he whispered.

Yes?

Speaking of endearments, he said, *it is my turn to remind you of another memory.*

What is it, darling?

The... the first time you called me that, perhaps, he said, blushing. *"Darling"...*

When he placed his fingers over my eyelids to close my eyes, I could see the younger Ryuunosuke of that particular memory, and we were in my room, and he was wearing a sleeping robe, one of my old ones, which made him look even smaller than he actually was. He was on the balcony outside my window, and he was watching everything around him with great interest, as if he had not seen this exact same sight numerous times already.

My heart swelled within my chest, and without thinking, I was already whispering, "Darling…"

Addressed to him like that, under my breath, it sounded like a secret.
It sounded, eerily, like love.

"What did you say?" Ryuunosuke had turned to look at me, a smile curling those lips that I have had the pleasure of kissing just the night before, and I was again shy, fearful of the implications of the word, but then he did not seem as if he would laugh, only understand, only accept me, because he knew, perhaps, before I even did, that I was, already, dangerously close to falling in love.
If I hadn't, already.

"Nothing," I said, reflexively, and he shook his head and joined me once more in bed, his delightfully sleepy scent enveloping me, and I relaxed despite myself. Here was familiarity. Here was home. "What is it," he insisted, and cupped my cheek in his hand, and I… I…

My god…

I…

I loved him, then.

"Darling."

I loved his huge smile, his trusting eyes. So, so much.

"Darling…" I breathed out, and Ryuunosuke sighed longingly.

"English," he decided, suddenly, "is a very beautiful language when it is you speaking it."

It is, affirmed the Ryuunosuke who was now before me, with me, in this dream. *It is... beautiful.*

I scooped him up in my arms, and there he existed, lovely and almost real, in my arms, and the heart in my chest yearned for him, yearned for the him who was half a world away from me, yearned for the inevitable little happy death I will have once I finally get to behold his dark eyes once more in the real world. And he smiled at me, Ryuunosuke, sadly, sadly, as if he knew a secret, as if the secret was such that he cannot imagine ever sharing it with me lest it break that same heart that yearned for him.

I wonder if it is possible to dream of a future that has not yet happened, I wondered out loud.

What kind of future? he asked, and I let him rest his head against my shoulder and held him tightly so that he can rest his arms on me, too.

A future... with a huge house, full of laughter... of peace... of children... of you!

Me! he exclaimed, laughing. *And how much do you want it to happen, my lord?*

Very much so, I said, *that if I were to wait any longer, I might just... fly over the waves, to you.*

"Will you miss me, my lord?" the younger Ryuunosuke in my memories asked me, on the same morning when he was about to leave me.

"Terribly," I whispered, then, and the sadness threatened to overshadow me, swallow me up, over and over, until there was nothing left—nothing but—

I am here.

My memories stuttered and faded into the dream, and Ryuunosuke was gripping my hand, so so tightly, as though it should hurt, but of course this was a dream, and I shouldn't be feeling it, but I am… and…

Never forget that, will you? Barok.

Darling...

The wistful expression on his face told me volumes, and unable to bear my longing anymore, I stuck my nose into his dark hair and tried to inhale as much of his scent as I could, even though the effort felt fruitless, and he closed his eyes and let the tears stream down his face.

Are you dreaming within this dream, darling?

I closed my eyes, and was taken to a vision of steam and smoke, of heavy, full-bloomed wisteria and the sweet scent of early-morning flesh; the sensation of fitting together with someone else as you wake up, and the sight of the slow smile that would spread across those lips. I dreamed the sights that Ryuunosuke saw in his side of the real world, and I knew from the way his hand tightened imperceptibly around mine that he, in turn, was dreaming of mine.

When we rested like this against each other, deep within the velvet folds of our shared dream, it was as though London and Tokyo were far, far away from us, that we were instead in a paradise created just for the two of us, and it was easy to believe that soon, soon,—

Do you see what I am dreaming of, my lord?

I smiled at this question.

Yes, I answered.

Is it a beautiful dream?

Yes, so much so that it took my breath away.

His childlike expression of happiness.

Might we be able to make it come true, my lord?

Yes, I wanted to say.

How can anyone say no to such a dream?

Yes, I wanted to say.

How can anyone deny the happiness on his face?

Yes, I wanted to say.

How can anyone imagine any other future but the one he has envisioned for us?

Yes, I wanted to say.

How can anyone let the universe decide on anything other than a happy ending?

Yes, I wanted to say.

How can anyone bear to snuff the tender light out of those earnest eyes?

Yes, I said, finally. *Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.*

Ryuunosuke's eyes were as round as saucers.

When he looks like how he looked to me right now, the tiredness of age vanishes, and I am again reminded of the young defense attorney who reached through the bars of my cell, and shook my hand, and saved me—

"...I want to believe in that look in your eyes. I need to believe in it."

His dark eyes widening as I made of him my request… his jaw dropping—

"...In tomorrow's trial… will you advocate for me?"

His relief, and his determination. His simple truth.

"Of course I will."

His unhesitating answer then. His quiet fire.

There was none of that trembling, doe-eyed fledgling student-attorney during our first meeting.

"It would be an honor."

Right at that moment, Ryuunosuke Naruhodou was… a force of nature.

Once upon a time, there was a hapless man who had gotten lost in his ardent search for the truth, and was left frozen in time when he got tangled in a web of lies.

Once upon a time, there was a hapless man who had gotten lost in the new world that he was thrust into, and struggled through hell and high water as he picked his way through it.

That we would find each other when we did can be called by no other name than a blessing—

You are most beautiful whenever you stand up and lead me to a new place that I would never have dreamed of seeing in all my life, darling.

Then, and now, it resonated, truthfully.

The horizon was brightening, slowly, slowly.

This dream… is about to end for the two of us.

When will I meet you again? he murmured, clinging to me.

Tonight, I replied, unhesitatingly.

And the next night?

And the next, I nodded, *and the next.*

And the next, he echoed. *And the one after that, and the one after that.*

Silently, we counted down the days, and the nights, and the days before we meet each other once more.

The wait is long, but we agreed— to wait— and wait—

Paradise, after all, is not created in a day.

Written By
Error404NotFound

Ryuu should have listened to what Holmes had to say. The streets of London were always dangerous, yes, but most so at night, where the darkness came up undefeated by the meager light the light posts could barely provide. It made sense, of course it did, and yet.

Ryuunosuke wishes he would learn to discriminate between the detective's intentionally misleading sense of humor and his once-in-a-full-moon sound advice.

Whatever the case, he couldn't do it today, so he is left to fend for himself. The cold nights of London aren't like the ones in Tokyo, he believes. Yes, he might be biased, but it's got to do with the way the tall buildings loom over him, as if the brick walls are ready to close in on him if he so much as lowers his guard. There are no man-eating buildings in Japan as far as he is concerned, so he wants to believe his fear is well-founded.

Perhaps he could have waited for Susato and Holmes to be done with their business, instead of announcing he'd go on his own and visit their newest client all the way to the other side of town. In his defense, he didn't know back then that the cab on his way back would refuse to bring him back to 221B.

"Oi, mate."

The voice rises in the silence, startling Ryuunosuke enough to make him almost reach for Karuma. Not that he'd do anything with her fully drawn out of her sheath, not against petty delinquents, but still.

There are three of them, and their silhouettes appear cut against the night sky. "You happen to know what time it is?"

"Why, yes!" Ryuu straightens, patting his pockets when a realization hits him. "Actually, uhm… I don't have a watch with me right now."

They don't halt their advance towards him, which doesn't help putting Ryuunosuke at ease. Maybe he *will* have to use Karuma.

"What is it, mate?" one of them asks, earning a laugh from his peers despite not being funny in the slightest. Ryuu takes a step back, and that somehow strikes them as even more endearing. "You lost?"

He is, yes, but he isn't about to admit that aloud. It's been a while since the last time he fought more than one opponent, namely that one time Kazuma convinced him to go to a bar after a particularly stressful day of thesis-writing. They had been jumped by, coincidentally, three guys, but back then Kazuma had been with him. They had emerged victorious, and that night, dodging drunken punches beside his best friend, Ryuunosuke had felt invincible.

Now, as he carefully closes his hand around Karuma's hilt, silently asking her to let him borrow some courage from her former master, he can feel his belly growing cold with fear. His breathing becomes a little agitated, and he can see the small puff of condensation in front of his mouth.

"Pardon the discourtesy," says a new voice behind him, one that Ryuu recognizes right away, that pulls him out of his reverie. "But it would seem like you are the ones lost."

Barok van Zieks stands tall next to him, a presence that must have materialized out of thin air, because Ryuunosuke didn't hear him coming at all. He isn't the only one surprised, apparently, because the three men take a precautionary step back.

"The Reaper!" one exclaims, and that seems to be more than enough to make them turn on their heels and hurriedly disappear down the street. Van Zieks doesn't even have to move a muscle.

After they are gone, silence falls between them. The far away noise of the main street barely reaches them, but Ryuunosuke clings to it like a lifeline during the brief time it takes for his heart to calm down.

He turns to his savior, which could or not be considered a mistake, as cold blue eyes are already on him. The prosecutor's usual scowl is present today too, but even more so, if that is even possible. Ryuu would venture and say he looks displeased.

But swallowing the need to run away too, he tells himself he should say thank you. For today, at the very least, van Zieks was his guardian angel.
He opens his mouth, but before he can utter a single word, van Zieks is already crossing his arms over his chest, narrowing his eyes.

"Pray tell, my learned friend, what," he says, and he grits out this last word,

"Are you doing out this late at night?"

Ryuunosuke can't help but shrink, if only the slightest bit. Suddenly he misses the thugs.

"I-I was— um, I was visiting a client—"

One of van Zieks' perfect eyebrow arches, inquisitive. Ryuu's eyes start wandering.

"—at the other side of town, so… it took me a little longer to come back."

Van Zieks observes him intently for a moment —in which Ryuu wants the ground beneath his feet to open up and swallow him whole—, and when he finds whatever he was looking for in Ryuu's face, he sighs. His disappointment feels tangible, like a slap on the cheek.

"I won't presume to know what that island of yours is like at nightfall, but one would think you've had more than enough time to acclimate to London's way of living by now."

An awkward chuckle bubbles up Ryuu's throat.

"Isn't Britain an island, too?"

Icy eyes glare at him.

Ryuu looks down, like a scolded child. While he understands that he was a little careless, it's not entirely his fault. He just took a wrong turn. And got scammed by a cab.

Van Zieks must be able to read his expression, because he shakes his head in that gesture Ryuunosuke is more than familiar with by now.

"Save your excuses. Be careful next time you must wander the city without a chaperone."

He must mean Susato. She is actually younger than him, but he isn't about to say that— he has some dignity left to protect. He suddenly feels like his shoulders weigh a whole ton more, though.

"Yes, sir."

More silence ensues after that. He is busy crafting a pretext to make himself scarce, but once again, van Zieks beats him to it.

"Let us part, then," he all but announces, turning on his heels. His cape flutters around his frame dramatically as he starts walking, and Ryuu is left with little choice but to follow suit.

"W-where are we going?"

"I'll drop you off at Baker Street, lest you mysteriously disappear. That judicial assistant of yours won't be able to enter a tribunal on her own in such a scenario, and I'd hate to miss her actual sound insights."

Ryuu doesn't have much to say to that, but he files in the compliment to let Susato know the Reaper of the Bailey holds her in such a high regard —when compared to Ryuunosuke himself, but still.

They make it to van Zieks' coach within little time. The driver greets them with a silent nod, but little else. He doesn't come off to open the door for his master, and Ryuu assumes it's because it's a waste of time when they are in the middle of the night.

Van Zieks gives the man instructions to take them to Baker Street, and that's that. They are left to their uncomfortable silence inside the cabin, but at the very least they aren't exposed to London's cruel cold anymore.

"May I ask what you were doing here, my lord?" Ryuu tries for a smile. "It doesn't appear to me that you were following your own advice."

Barok ignores his attempt at a joke, pushes his nose high into the air. Ryuu wonders if he doesn't get tired of going through life frowning.

"I was commissioning a suit. My usual tailor didn't have the time to aid my petition on such short notice."

"Oh! What kind of suit?"

The look van Zieks levels him with says very clearly that it's none of his business. And it's not, not really, so Ryuu doesn't ask again.

Later, when he is safely home once more, he profusely thanks the prosecutor for taking the time to give him a ride. Van Zieks brushes it off in that way only he can, as if implying it was only natural he went out of his way to help a peasant in need.

He is lost. Again. There is no way, he thinks as he nervously wanders streets that look a tad too posh for it to be his own neighborhood, but here he is. Well, Ryuu tells himself, at the very least it doesn't look like he'll get mugged and left to rot on the side of the road— right? Even worse, the imminent rain would wash away the blood and thus the clues behind the murder, but alas.

He is very seriously considering to stop taking on interviews with potential clients after 5 p.m. when they are not willing to go all the way down to Baker Street. It makes sense, if one takes into account these people live in the absolute opulence of a fine neighborhood in central London, in their big, ostentatious mansions. Of course they'd rather pay extra for a domiciliary visit, rather than lower themselves to mingle among commoners. Well, Ryuunosuke needs the money, what can he say?

Although, he thinks as he turns on a corner barely lit by a puddle of orange light, those extra pennies might not be worth it if he ends up at the other end of a pocket knife, or worse.

The next block is entirely composed of an estate with a huge patio and a tall, black iron fence bordering the property all around. The mansion itself can be seen some distance in, more akin to a gothic, vampiric lair than an aristocratic household. It might be due to the poor lighting, or the fact that Ryuu is a tiny bit jumpy as of now, but he wants to believe everyone would walk past it as quickly as possible, too.

There is a rumble overhead, a threat from the gray clouds above, and as he looks up, he spots the family crest embedded into the metallic bars of the property.

It's the van Zieks crest, of course it is.

A crazy idea crosses his slightly desperate mind; he could ask his— uh, coworker? for some help getting home tonight. Maybe lord van Zieks will think back of that one time a month ago he prevented his very likely demise, and find it in his heart to extend a helping hand once more. Or at the very least he will

send him back on a coach, because he'd rather do that than let Ryuu spend the night in his home.

Lord van Zieks might be a little scary looking, and downright rude most of the time, but Ryuunosuke wants to believe he isn't a bad person. That much of a bad person. Not too bad a person.

Ryuunosuke sighs. He isn't very sure about this plan of action, but he is nothing but an expert pulling stuff from under his sleeve, so he presses forward while looking as dignified as he possibly can.

There is an old man serving as a gatekeeper. He appears a little tired, but he is overall very kind and attentive. Ryuu lets him know he is a friend from work —a lie, that's a lie right there— of van Zieks', and he even shows the man his armband to prove he is a lawyer. The gatekeeper narrows his eyes at it, and no recognition whatsoever crosses his features.

"What's your name, lad?" he asks instead, choosing to ignore the whole exchange so far.

Ryuunosuke straightens when he says his name, but he is already trying to come up with a plan B.

"Oh, yes, that does sound familiar!" the man exclaims, lighting up. "That eastern detective the young master used to talk about."

It takes a solid second for Ryuunosuke to understand he is being mistaken for someone else based on nothing other than his name.

He is sick of these people, but he'll take it.

The old man lets him through just when it starts drizzling. Ryuu makes his way through the patio, and despite the light rain, his shoulders end up somewhat damp by the time he gets to the porch.

The door is as big and ominous-looking as the rest of the house, even the door knocker is shaped like the wide-open jaws of a hound. He knocks a couple of times, not really sure if he should be making noise this late into the night. A few moments pass before he knocks again, and when he is middle-action, the door opens, heavy on its hinges.

Barok van Zieks appears at the other side, white dress shirt half buttoned,

tousled hair and a bottle of wine hanging from his free hand. It's something he hasn't seen before, despite the frankly disturbing amount of alcohol he's witnessed the prosecutor drinking while in court. It shouldn't be all that much surprising, and yet… Ryuu would be taken aback by the sight if he weren't on the receiving end of a tired glare.

Ryuunosuke recovers, as pinned as he feels by those blue eyes.

"G-good evening, sir!"

Van Zieks blinks once, as if giving himself some time to understand what, or who is in front of him.

"What do you want," he deadpans, not even bothering with phrasing it as a question.

His cheeks are a tad red, an unusual color in the otherwise bland palette the prosecutor wears like a constipated cloud, and Ryuu's eyes flick down to the wine. As inebriated as he apparently is, van Zieks doesn't miss Ryuu's curious gaze, and he swiftly moves the bottle out of sight.

Ryuu clears his throat.

"Um, I was a little— how do I put it… lost? And I was wondering if you could… maybe… help me out?"

Van Zieks takes his sweet time scrutinizing the young lawyer, which only manages to make him more nervous, making the possibility of van Zieks slamming the door on his face all the more plausible.

A maid shows up from behind the lord, and judging by the horrorized expression on her face, she wasn't expecting any of this. Her eyes dart from him to Ryuu on the threshold.

"Young master! W-what are you doing up?"

Van Zieks doesn't appear fazed at all, and his blue gaze remains on Ryuunosuke all the same.

"Right on time. Ready a room for our guest, if you please."

The maid bows.

"Yes, of course."

It takes a second for Ryuu to understand the implication behind that instruction.

"Oh! Thank you very much, but I don't think it will be—"

Van Zieks pays no heed to his objections and turns on his heels, leaving a confused Ryuunosuke with a fidgety maid to figure it out for themselves.

Ryuu isn't sure about what just happened, but one look at the maid and she luckily snaps back to her senses for the both of them. She invites him in with a silent gesture, so there is that.

The inside of the house is as sinister as the exterior lets on, but at least he isn't freezing anymore. According to the maid, the guest rooms are located on the second floor, and she thoughtfully offers to show him where he will be staying for the night.

The candle she is holding up to light their advance flickers with each step they take, which makes Ryuu wonder: how did van Zieks make his way back without one? Maybe he has night vision, like a bat. Not that it matters.

"So… where is everyone?" he asks, just to make conversation.

"I was supposed to stay on night duty, oh my, how very embarrassing," she mutters, pained. "To think the young master got to the door before I did…" That does seem like a problem, but Ryuu remains silent. Lord van Zieks appeared a little— occupied, so maybe he won't even remember this tomorrow. That train of thought makes Ryuu wonder aloud: "Is Lord van Zieks… okay?" The question could be considered awfully impolite, but something tells Ryuu this maid is way more concerned about her own standing with the lord of the house than about whatever he has to say.

"Why, yes. He's been like this since the party."

Ryuu makes a face.

"He… doesn't like parties?"

"Well, Mr Bernard— that is the coachman, I'll have you know— he said there were some impolite attendees among the guests. Nobles always say it's

us servants who can't keep quiet, but you should hear what they gossip about people mere meters away."

That doesn't sound like a fun party at all, and while Ryuu has no idea what these people said about van Zieks, it seems to have made some sort of impact on him. Funny, seeing the prosecutor strikes him as the kind of person who doesn't care what others might think of him. He is the Reaper of the Bailey, after all.

Was it that bad, what they said of him?

They make it upstairs, and they stop in front of what Ryuunosuke assumes are going to be his lodgings for tonight. Then, the maid jumps in her place, startling the young lawyer.

"Oh my! Would you like something for dinner, Mr…?"

The thought of waking everyone up is more than enough to quelch any lingering hunger he might have, so he is quick to shake his head. He does tell the maid his name and, surprisingly, she remembers it later when she comes by to leave him a tray with milk, warm bread and tea.

The room is as big as expected of a mansion like this, and albeit it reminds Ryuunosuke of a location out of a horror story, he can't deny he is relieved he won't have to spend the night under the raging storm outside.

It is a ridiculous thought to have after being offered shelter, but he can't help but be a tad anxious. The air in the room feels oppressive, as if there is something lurking in the shadows ready to launch at him as soon as he relaxes.

So maybe he could visit the restroom, splash some water onto his face and force himself to remember this is a noble's opulent mansion instead of a vampire's lair. It's rather impolite of him to think this, but the rain outside, the occasional lighting that bathes the old furniture in momentary light, and the darkness everything seems to sink in don't help.

Quietly, he slips into the hallway.

Only then he realizes his mistake. It feels the walls might close in on him at any given moment; with no candle to guide his path, the end of the corridor seems like a wolf's fauces. The house appears inhabited at first glance, with nothing but the sound of the rain against the windows to make him company, but he

knows for a fact there must be, at the very least, a maid awake.

It doesn't take long for him to make a wrong turn. Kazuma would always tell him he had an appalling sense of orientation, and Ryuu won't deny it, but he always hoped he was exaggerating.

He is just starting to consider turning on his heels and be thankful for the huge bed he had been lent for the night, when he feels a shiver travel up his spine.

"Can't you stay in place for five minutes without getting lost?"

The deep voice startles him, makes his heart jump in his throat.

"Lord van Zieks!" he turns, only to find the lord of the house glaring at him. Nothing new under the sun, but it still manages to make Ryuu shrink a little. He tries for a smile. "Good evening. How are you doing?"

A stupid question, really, but it's too late to take it back. Van Zieks looks tired, black bags under his eyes are notorious even in the dim light he carries with him.

"The restroom for guests is right across your room."

Up close, he smells sweet, like wine. And well, judging by the way his words sound a little bit linked together, anyone would have noticed his state sooner or later.

"Uhm, perhaps you should drink some water," Ryuu suggests.

Unsurprisingly, the advice is not well received.

"And you, mind your own business."

Ryuu clears his throat. It would appear a drunk van Zieks is as patient as a completely sober one.

"W-well, I just wanted to say I'm grateful for your help. It's freezing outside."

Van Zieks seemingly decides he is not worth another minute of his time, because he turns on his heel and starts for the hallway, taking with him the little light Ryuu's eyes desperately need to find his way in the dark. So hurriedly, he follows close.

The sound of their steps is muffled by the carpet, so the silence around them is otherwise left unperturbed. The rain outside doesn't appear to be letting up any time soon, either.

They stop in front of a door. The candle falters in van Zieks' hold as he pushes it open, all under Ryuu's curious scrutiny. The young lawyer takes a peek inside the room, and despite the poor lighting, he can tell it's not a bathroom.

Only then van Zieks seems to remember he was there the whole time. When he looks at him, the sharp features of his face appear suddenly all too exhausted. Ryuu briefly wonders if the lord somehow forgot what he was in the middle of doing, or if maybe it was Ryuu himself who arrogantly assumed he was being led to his original destination.

Ignoring him altogether, van Zieks just goes in, leaving the door open in his wake. Ryuu remains frozen in place, unsure as to what the prosecutor wants — or rather, doesn't want— from him. A voice in his brain suggests that this could be an invitation to come in as well, but Ryuu seriously doubts it's the case. Not that it matters much, seeing he is more lost now than he was ten minutes ago. Swallowing his doubts, he quietly slips inside.

Van Zieks sits on his bed, and since the curtains of the chambers aren't drawn all the way, the moonlight pools easily over the desk by the window, granting Ryuu some details of the room. It very much looks like what he'd sleep in, were he the lord of a mansion and the heir to his family name. The latter he already is, but he isn't nobility, so that's beside the point.

Ryuu takes a step further into the room, and his feet stumble upon an empty bottle. Grimacing, he risks a glance up at van Zieks, only to find he is too busy taking a swing from another bottle to glare at his clumsiness. The momentary relief is short-lived, quickly washed away by the memory of what the chatty maid told him earlier. That bit about people gossiping at the party. Is that really what is affecting him so much?

It's not really his place to pry, but he's seen van Zieks down chalice after chalice and… well, they always seemed like water for him. Now, the prosecutor doesn't look so good.

Ryuu kisses goodbye his chance to rest up early and clears his throat.

"They were… mean to you," he says, careful.

Van Zieks snorts, but it's evident he didn't find it funny. He is swaying slightly. "They know nothing," he rasps, running a hand through his hair, making a mess out of it. "Not about me, nor about my family."

It sounds like something he's repeated to himself over and over, and Ryuu feels a twist in his chest. He doesn't know what van Zieks' deal is, not really, but he can't help but imagine he's gone through a lot. He wears a literal scar on his face, for crying out loud. He surely hasn't had an easy life, despite being nobility.

He shouldn't ask, so he doesn't.

As he draws a little closer, Ryuunosuke ponders that he must be really drunk if he's stopped caring about his appearance and proper manners, something he had yet to see from lord van Zieks. Despite being impolite most of the time he speaks to him, van Zieks has never allowed himself to play the part of anything beneath his station, at least not in front of Ryuu. He wonders if his servants know a different, darker side of him that the rest of the world doesn't.

While Ryuunosuke is deep in thought, van Zieks flops back on his bed, throwing an arm over his eyes. The bottle he was just holding rolls over the mattress to the floor, empty.

Ryuu remains in place, hesitating. Should he leave now?

Then, a quite odd sound bubbles from the depths of van Zieks' chest. It's a mirthless laugh, a low rumble that can be barely heard over the clatter of the rain on the windows.

"You were planning to defend yourself with that sword," the lord mutters, not bothering to look at Ryuu from under his arm. "That *kahtana*."

It takes a moment for the young lawyer to understand what he is referring to. That night he was considering using Karuma to potentially save his own life, the night when van Zieks came out of nowhere, shrouded in darkness, to his aid. Ryuu's cheeks feel a little warmer. Why lord van Zieks is thinking about that time, or the fact that he saw Ryuu's fingers inching closer to Karuma back then, is something he doesn't want to dwell on right now.

"I-I was prepared to do what I must," he retorts, back straight, but thanking God he could get away with keeping his eyes on the carpet. "And I'll have you

know I have some training in kendo."

There is no immediate response to that, so he waits. And then waits a little more.

"My lord? Are you asleep?"

Ryuunosuke panics for a moment, wondering if he should go get some help. He isn't used to the gloomy, quiet kind of drunks; whenever Kazuma convinced him of hitting that izakaya close to the campus, he and all his friends would be the kind of drunk that are too noisy, too much of a clown for the owners of the shop to let them linger for long.

Excusing himself in a soft voice, he draws close to the bed to inspect the situation. It's faint, but the gentle heaving of van Zieks' chest indicates he is still breathing. It's a tad labored, but the rise and fall of his chest tell Ryuu that, at the very least, he is not dead.

That's good. One less thing to worry about. Although, there is a jar of water solemnly sitting on the dresser table— maybe he should fetch some water for him, leave it close in case he jolts awake before dawn with a dry throat and a throbbing head.

He takes a single step with no incident, but on the second one his foot lands on top of the discarded wine bottle on the carpet, making him lose his balance. He falls clumsily on the mattress next to the other man, his hand flying out to seek leverage and landing on top of van Zieks.

"Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry!" he whispers, heart about to leap out of his chest.

Van Zieks doesn't react, and Ryuu genuinely doesn't want to find out if he is just pretending nothing happened. If he really didn't wake up, Ryuu wants to take this chance Heaven is giving him and just flee.

He attempts to get up, but the man next to him humming something unintelligible. Then, van Zieks rolls over himself and wraps an arm around him.

An alert signal goes off in Ryuu's brain, but he doesn't move. He doesn't dare to. "L-lord van–?" he tries, and receives no response, just the sound of gentle snoring.

He stays like that for a few moments, truthfully at a loss.

He should— he should get up and leave. No matter how drunk van Zieks is right now, tomorrow —or whenever he comes back to consciousness— he is not going to be happy to find him in his bed. Ryuu can already picture the hounds let loose to chase him out the manor grounds.
A tad too out of his comfort zone, he swallows down the knot of wool that forms in his throat.

"Um," he starts, carefully pushing van Zieks' chest. "E-excuse me…"

It doesn't work. If anything, van Zieks holds him closer. The prosecutor smells of cologne and the scent strikes Ryuu as so expensive and masculine he can feel his brain short-circuiting for half a second. His arm is heavy and his body exudes heat, and despite the tight embrace he is holding Ryuu so very gently that he doesn't have any problem picturing himself falling asleep in such a place.

This is… less than ideal.

Once more, he tries to wiggle his way out of strong arms, but van Zieks doesn't let him. Jeez. Who would have thought lord van Zieks was a clingy drunk?
In his sleep, van Zieks mutters something under his breath that Ryuu feels he shouldn't have heard. He didn't know van Zieks had a brother. The house seems all the more gigantic and empty now, terribly lonely. Ryuu himself knows what it's like missing someone, like a family member who isn't around anymore. Biting his lower lip, he slides one of his arms over the other man's middle, letting his hands settle over his back, tracing a soft, barely-there motion in an attempt to soothe his troubled mind. Van Zieks curls into him like a child, making Ryuu's breath catch.

Okay, maybe he can stay. Not that he has any choice. Come morning, though, he will have to come up with a good excuse so he isn't hunt for sport. Van Zieks' warm breath tickles Ryuu's forehead. He can't really see his face like this, but he hopes he has peaceful dreams, at least for tonight.

Hugging him back, pressing himself closer to him, Ryuu tucks his head under van Zieks' chin, and lets his eyes flutter closed.

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the art of compromise

Written By
Cammy

Naruhodou makes a striking figure, lit from the side by the fireplace as he is. The fire's warm light catches in his dark hair and his usual black uniform, softening the harsh lines. With Naruhodou blending into the room's shadows, it's easy to forget he doesn't belong here in this quiet town house. That he is simply an unexpected visitor who should be spectacularly at odds with the life Barok has shaped for himself within these walls. Then again, Barok has been wrong before. When once he'd thought Naruhodou had no place in London's judicial system, he now firmly believes the opposite. The man had been unflinching in the face of an ugly truth, unlike so many of Barok's colleagues.

Unwilling to be caught staring so rudely in the doorway, Barok steps into the room proper, his boots clicking against the wooden floor. Though he makes no attempt to hide his presence, Naruhodou keeps his back to Barok, completely unaware as he leans in slightly to study something intently. There are a number of curiosities displayed on the mantle, but Naruhodou pays no attention to them. With an uncomfortable pinching sensation in his chest, Barok realises what has drawn Naruhodou's piercing gaze: the pictures on the wall. Barok stands frozen there for a moment. He'd let his guard down, bringing Naruhodou to this room filled with personal effects. It's been so long since he's entertained anyone here that he'd genuinely forgotten about them.

"I see you've found the pictures," Barok says without warning. Satisfaction surges through him when Naruhodou flinches in surprise, pleased to still have this kind of unsettling effect on the lawyer. Then, he grimaces. Shame chases on the heels of that brief satisfaction, like the bitter aftertaste of a wine that hasn't had the chance to age properly. It's difficult, catching himself in these old bad habits. But no matter how unpleasant the process, it's preferable to treating an ally with such disrespect. Especially Naruhodou, who has gone above and beyond to help him–a man who he can objectively say did not deserve that courtesy.

"Sorry!" Naruhodou's hands clench at his sides, the entire line of his body gone stiff as a board. Barok hasn't seen him so ill at ease since his first time in the Old Bailey, looking as if he believes one wrong step could result in dire consequences. "Was I not supposed to look? I thought, since you brought me here…"

Naruhodou trails off when Barok gives a shake of his head. "You are welcome to investigate as you like," Barok says, which isn't completely accurate. A part of him still baulks at revealing any kind of vulnerability that leaves him an easy target, but he supposes there isn't much sense to hiding from someone who already knows all the horrible details of his family's past. Besides, Naruhodou isn't wrong: he's here with permission, and that's practically an invitation to snoop written in Barok's hand. He raises a brow at the defence lawyer, expression wry. "Not that lack of permission has stopped you before."

For a second, the air between them seems to freeze. No doubt Naruhodou remembers the way he and Iris had invaded his office without invitation, shameless in their prying and accompanying commentary. Then, Naruhodou's shoulders shake, breaking the silence with a laugh that he quickly stifles with one hand.

"We were, ah, rather nosy, weren't we?" Naruhodou manages to say in-between chuckles. Barok is relieved to note that the tension he'd previously held has completely disappeared in the face of his mirth. "I feel as if I should apologise, but if I'm honest, I don't regret it. I'll bet you anything Iris doesn't either."

His niece's name brings forth another set of complicated emotions in him, all knotted together, and Barok has no idea where to even start detangling them. "I wouldn't know," he replies stiffly, the words sounding as awkward to his ears as they had felt on his tongue.

Naruhodou's eyes widen. Barok has no idea what expression he's wearing now, but it must be telling to get a reaction like that.

"As I said." Naruhodou's gaze settles into something contemplative as he watches Barok. "I'm certain she doesn't regret it. Stopping by your office gave us both a chance to learn more about you at the time."

The smile that accompanies those words is unbearable to Barok just then. Worth learning about? When he still bore the Reaper's name at the time? Once he'd found honour in the burden, but knowing what he does now, it's a laughable notion.

Fighting the urge to pinch at the bridge of his nose, Barok finds himself turning away from Naruhodou, avoiding a confrontation head-on for what feels like the first time in a long while. The contents of the tray he's holding rattle with the sudden movement, reminding him why he'd left Naruhodou alone in the room in the first place. A second's worth of hesitation is all he allows himself before he

closes the sitting room doors with a sense of finality. Undoubtedly, this will be a surprise to any of the maids in his employment, and word will spread to the rest of the household before the hour is over. It would be a disservice to assume any of them have forgotten how long it's been since he's entertained anyone in the sitting room, preferring to keep guests to the more formal drawing room on the rare occasion he has any. Whatever conclusions might be drawn because of this is, perhaps, a small price to pay for some privacy. It's a precaution; Naruhodou has an uncanny talent for prying information from him, no matter how closely he holds onto them. At least if he is to lay his soul bare again, this time it will be in a closed room with someone trusted for company, rather than in court and before the members of the judiciary.

The tray makes a muted click against the cloth-covered wood of the table as Barok sets it down. In his peripheral vision, he sees Naruhodou take a seat across from him. Steam rises from his cup when he fills it with tea from the pot. After Naruhodou showed up on his doorstep unexpectedly and threw his evening into disarray, Barok finds some comfort in the simple routine of adding the usual dash of milk to his tea, before following it with three sugarcubes. As he's stirring the sugar and milk in, he catches sight of the startled look Naruhodou's giving him and can't think of a reason for it.

"You've seen me drink tea before, Mr Naruhodou. Surely you didn't think I drank nothing but wine?"

Naruhodou's lips twitch. His eyes flick down to Barok's teacup, something strangely like amusement sparking in them, before he finishes pouring from the milk jug and doesn't reach for the bowl of sugar at all. "Oh, I know that. You did like the blend Iris gave you."

Barok narrows his eyes at the defence lawyer, teacup still held to his lips. He's missing something here, and he would almost prefer the stilted exchanges they'd had throughout dinner to the prickling sensation in his chest. There was a time when he could've picked up the nuances of any conversation with little effort. Given his solitary way of life, he's suspected that any ease he had in the company of others has just about abandoned him like many other things after his brother's death. Still, it's uncomfortable to be confronted with proof of it like this.

Despite his frustration, Barok sets the teacup down on its saucer with care. Unlike his chalices, it and the rest of the porcelain sets in the town house are irreplaceable; they'd once belonged to his parents and Barok has no intention of mishandling them.

“What are you really here for, Mr Naruhodou?” he bites out, barely keeping his tone civil. He’s only had a day to himself since being released from the gaol–hardly enough time to really think about that awful trial–and being in close proximity to Naruhodou for hours when the man gets so easily under his skin has not improved his mood. Knowing he’s being an ungracious host does nothing to stop him from lashing out right now. “Much as I appreciate your concern, I suspect you have some other motive for visiting. You would not have stayed this long for a simple check up.”

Nevermind that it was Barok himself who had brought up dinner to begin with.

Naruhodou’s smile goes tight for a moment. Then, he sighs, scrubbing a hand through his already unruly hair. “I wasn’t lying about wanting to check up on you. The trial brought up a lot of bad memories,” he says with that earnest expression Barok has grown far too accustomed to seeing in the courtroom. “But…you’re right. There’s another reason I wanted to stop by today.”

It’s Naruhodou. Barok doesn’t believe that Naruhodou would cause him grief after doing so much to help him, but still he crosses his arms over his chest to guard against whatever is coming. “Out with it, then.”

The eyes that meet his are as kind as ever, brimming with that steely resolve Barok has always admired, reluctantly as it was in the beginning. “I’m going back to Japan with Professor Mikotoba. It felt wrong to leave without saying goodbye.”

Though there’s no reason for his apprehension to crystallise into dismay, that’s exactly what it does. Barok’s hands curl into fists on his lap, far away from the delicate teacup in front of him and, conveniently, out of Naruhodou’s line of sight.

“When?” he asks.

“Ah… tomorrow.” Finally, Naruhodou looks away, fiddling with his cup. “I meant to see you yesterday, but I was still in the middle of packing. I only made the decision after the trial, you see.”

“I thought you meant to stay here longer.” Even with his voice quiet and low, Barok doesn’t manage to conceal the turmoil Naruhodou has kindled in him.

Naruhodou's laugh is a touch sheepish. "I did, I swear! It's funny–coming here with Asougi was an impulsive thing, so I suppose leaving the same way is only fair."

An awkward silence stretches on when Barok doesn't respond, as if simply uttering the news has opened a chasm between them, separating them the way the ocean will in less than a day. What can Barok even say? Melancholy is already taking root in him, no matter how foolish he tells himself he is being. There's a certain irony in it all that makes Barok scowl. Just when he's learnt to appreciate Naruhodou's presence in his life, the defence lawyer plans to leave, giving him mere hours to come to terms with it. To think, nearly a year ago, Barok would have dearly loved to have him banished from the courts, eager to see the last of him.

Naruhodou's expression softens. "Lord van Zieks…I must sound incredibly irresponsible. Would you believe me if I said I didn't make this decision lightly? I know I have little experience compared to someone like you, but what Professor Mikotoba said got me thinking. If there's any chance I can help the people back home as a lawyer, then I want to take it."

Just as quickly as the ire had filled him, it bleeds out of him now, seeping from wounds that haven't had a chance to scab over, let alone heal. In the end, Barok simply feels drained as he stares out the window. It's a mercy that the late hour means darkness has already long blanketed London, interrupted occasionally by the soft glow of the city's street lamps. Something about the night softens unpleasant truths and makes them easier to swallow. What Barok knows is this: no matter how highly he's come to value Naruhodou's steadfast companionship, he has no right to demand Naruhodou stay when he's needed elsewhere.

"It's easier to believe than you think," he says, hand finally steady enough to reach for his teacup again. "I've seen you rush to the aid of people in need, no matter how hopeless the case. You even fought for someone like me, when I had been nothing but discourteous to you and your friends.

"This is an extension of that." Barok's eyes meet Naruhodou's intently, reading the astonishment in them with little effort. He wonders if Naruhodou can read the conflict in him with the same sort of ease. "If your mind is truly made up, then it's my opinion London will be losing a fine lawyer."

It's shockingly easy to disarm Naruhodou with compliments, Barok realises, watching Naruhodou fumble and blush, the same way he had back in the defendant's lobby.

“Thank you,” Naruhodou breathes out, once he’s rallied.

“No need to thank me for simply telling the truth.”

Like many of the words Barok has spoken tonight, his reply has several layers to it. It’s unlikely Naruhodou will understand everything Barok wishes to convey in the short time they have left, but the thought comes as a relief. Now that they’ve reached a tentative understanding, Barok would rather like the chance to reflect on his own, without Naruhodou’s influence. The defence lawyer has already done the lion’s share of exposing the lies woven into his past. It’s time for Barok to step out of the night he’s found solace in to finish the work.

When the clock strikes midnight, Barok is still awake, to his chagrin. In just a few hours, 221B Baker Street will be empty of its occupants, the five of them piling into hansom cabs that will take them to the train station. From there, they’ll eventually reach the pier, where a ship will finally take Naruhodou out of reach.

Barok leans forward to stare into the fireplace, elbows braced against his thighs. Though Naruhodou left hours ago, thoughts of him continue to cycle through Barok’s mind, stubborn as the man himself. Barok supposes it can’t be helped, when he’s been at the forefront of his thoughts since he turned up. And before that, if Barok feels like being honest. It’s difficult to believe he might not have known about Naruhodou’s departure until days after the fact, if Naruhodou hadn’t delivered the news himself.

As Barok tilts his head back with a sigh, the glint of light on a picture frame catches his eyes. It’s the same one Naruhodou had been examining earlier. He almost chuckles. Without getting up to look at it, Barok can see the picture in his mind’s eye: him, just shy of ten years in age, clinging to his brother. Balmung, still a puppy at the time, nestled in his brother’s arms. If he had given Naruhodou the chance to ask about the picture, would he have answered? Truthfully, he does not know the answer himself.

However, wondering about it now is pointless, when his own resolve had solidified somewhere between that point in time and this one. Barok curls his right hand, rubbing his fingers together pensively. Who would have ever guessed that his armour, so carefully maintained over the years, could be broken through with a simple handshake and a promise? Or perhaps there’s nothing simple about it. Very few people have earned his trust the way Naruhodou has.

Coming from anyone else, the glimmer of determination and the firm clasp of a hand would have done little to sway him. Earlier in the evening, he'd intended to send Naruhodou off with nothing but cordial well wishes, unwilling to press for more in case it were unwelcome. He would've been content with that, letting his overwhelming gratitude for Naruhodou simmer and eventually fade with time. Now that Naruhodou has taken the initiative again and extracted a promise of letters from him, though, Barok intends to keep it.

Remembering the way Naruhodou had haltingly shared anecdotes over dinner, bravely forging on despite his companion's reticence, Barok stands and makes his way to the desk in the corner. Paper, quill, and ink are all found in the drawer with no delay. Anything he writes now will have to be kept here until he's reasonably sure it will reach Japan around the same time as Naruhodou, but Barok sees nothing wrong with getting a head start. He studies the picture on the wall again, contemplative. While he isn't quite ready to reconcile the image of the righteous brother he'd looked up to with the man who had been forged unwillingly into the Professor, the pain that comes with thinking of happier times is already lessening into a dull ache. Perhaps the day his brother brought Balmung home would be a good place to start.

With the memory of Naruhodou's warm palm pressed to his fresh in his mind, it's easy for Barok to put the quill to paper, words spilling across the page.

"Dear Mr Naruhodou..."

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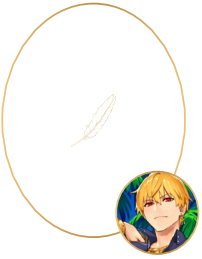

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